

Victims: Preventing Students From Becoming 'Bully-Targets'

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Children who are chronically bullied are often deeply unhappy in school, suffer from low self-esteem, and often find themselves socially rejected by their classmates as a result of the bullying. Teachers are likely to see another 'hidden' cost of bullying: as students are victimized, their grades frequently suffer.

The best way for any school to assist children victimized by bullies is to adopt a whole-school approach to bully prevention. Even if working alone, however, teachers can take immediate action to make life easier for children in their classroom who are being bullied.

Take Steps to Ensure the Victim's Safety. Victims are often physically weaker or otherwise less powerful than the bully. They may blame themselves for the bullying and believe that adults cannot help them to deal with the bully. When adults intervene to help a victim, they should above all make arrangements to keep the victim safe from future bullying attacks. Consider these ideas as a means for better understanding how seriously victims are affected by bullying in your school or classroom and for helping these victims to stay safe in school.

- Some victims may be reluctant to come forward. Have children complete an anonymous questionnaire that asks them if they are bullied, whether they have witnessed bullying, and where and when bullying that they have experienced or observed took place. Act on students' feedback by taking steps such as increasing adult supervision in locations where bullying takes place to make them safe for all students.
- Select or create a 'safe-room' that is always staffed with adults (e.g., a well-supervised study-hall, 'drop-in' counseling center, Resource Room). During times of the day when the student is most likely to be targeted for bullying (e.g., lunch period), assign the student to the safe-room.
- Examine the victim's daily schedule. For any activities where there is likely to be little adult supervision, either make arrangements to increase that supervision or adjust the child's schedule to eliminate these undersupervised 'blind spots.'

Help the Victim to Develop Positive Connections With Others. When choosing a victim, bullies typically target children who have few or no friends. If a child has at least one significant friend in school, he or she is less likely to be bullied -and is usually better able to cope with the effects of bullying when it occurs. The teacher's goal, then, is to strengthen the social standing of the victim with classmates and other students and adults in the school. As people in the school community develop more positive connections with the victimized student, they may be willing to intervene to prevent the victim from being bullied. Here are ideas that may promote positive connections between the victim and other students or adults:

- Train socially inept children in basic social skills, such as how to invite a classmate to play a game or to seek permission from a group of children to join in a play activity.
- Pair students off randomly for fun, interactive learning or leisure activities. These accidental pairings give children a chance to get to know each other and can 'trigger' friendships. Consider changing the seating chart periodically to foster new relationships.
- If a child receives pullout special education services, try to avoid scheduling these services during class free-time. Otherwise, the child loses valuable opportunities to interact with peers and establish or strengthen social relationships.
- Enlist one or more adults in the school to spend time with the child as 'mentors.' (Once these adults begin to spend time with the child, they will then be likely to actively intervene if they see the student being bullied!) Give these adults ideas for how they can structure sessions with the student (i.e., playing board games, having lunch together, etc.) Suggest to the student that he or she occasionally 'invite a friend' to these activities.

- Train staff, older student volunteers, or adult volunteers to be 'play-helpers.' Train them to organize and supervise high-interest children's game and activities for indoors and outdoors. (When possible, select games and activities that are easy to learn, can accommodate varying numbers of players, and allow children to join in mid-activity.) Place these play-helpers on the playground, in classrooms, in a corner of the lunchroom, or other areas where students have unstructured free time. The play-helpers may also be encouraged to pay special attention to those children with few friends are likely to be socially excluded, making sure that these children are recruited to participate in organized play with adult support as needed.

Teach Assertiveness Skills. After a victim has been repeatedly bullied, he or she may find it very difficult to 'stand up' to the bully. One explanation for the bully's power over the victim is that the bully has learned the victimized student's vulnerabilities. If the victim then starts to resist being bullied, the bully is emboldened to persistently attack the victim (e.g., through teasing, social ostracism, or physical harm) until the victim is again overwhelmed and defeated. At the point where it has become chronic, bullying can be so ingrained that only decisive adult intervention can free the victim from this abusive relationship.

When a bully first approaches and attempts to dominate a potential victim, however, the targeted student still has maneuvering room and may successfully fend off the bully by using basic assertiveness skills. The bully's goal when targeting a student is to exploit the victim's perceived weakness(es) in order to gain dominance over him or her. If the potential victim maintains his or her composure, stands firm, and continues to behave appropriately even when provoked, the bully will find that the supposed victim is not so weak as he or she first thought.

A few simple assertiveness rules that you can teach to students are to:

- Respond to taunts, insults, or teasing with a bland response ("Oh." "That's your opinion." "Maybe.") Don't let bullies see that they have upset you.
- Get away from the situation if you start to get very angry.
- Say "No" firmly and loudly if you don't want to do something that someone tells you to do. Stand straight up and look that person in the eye when you say it.
- Refuse to let others talk you into doing something that you will be sorry for--even if they dare you!
- Report incidents of bullying to adults.

Be sure that you students do not confuse *assertiveness* with physical or verbal *aggression*. While the weaker victim will likely regret aggressively attacking the bully, he or she may well be successful by simply standing firm against the bully. And even if the potential victim is not entirely successful when using assertiveness skills during a particular episode, that student might still manage to stop the bullying from becoming chronic by showing the bully that he or she is not an 'easy mark.'

References

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